

# THE IMPACT OF MENTHOL ON PUBLIC HEALTH

California Department of Public Health  
California Tobacco Control Program  
[cdph.ca.gov/programs/Tobacco](http://cdph.ca.gov/programs/Tobacco)

## About Menthol

- Menthol is a compound naturally occurring in mint plants, but great quantities are also produced synthetically. Menthol is an additive to all commercial tobacco products, not just menthol cigarettes.<sup>1</sup>
- Because of menthol's cool, minty candy-like flavor and fresh odor, it is used as an additive in many products other than cigarettes. Menthol can be found in lip balms, cough medicines, mouthwash, toothpaste, chewing gum, and candy, as well as in beauty products and perfumes.<sup>2</sup>
- Menthol is considered the tobacco industry's "starter" ingredient.<sup>1</sup> Menthol's anesthetizing effect makes the smoke "smooth" and easier to inhale while masking the harshness of tobacco, making menthol cigarettes especially popular among young and beginner smokers.<sup>3</sup>
- Menthol cigarettes are not safer than regular cigarettes. Menthol cigarettes have been shown to increase youth initiation, inhibit cessation and promote relapse.<sup>1</sup>
- Menthol cigarettes represent 20 percent of the market share, which means 1 in 5 cigarette packs sold and consumed are menthols.<sup>4</sup> Menthol smokers tend to be female, younger, members of ethnic

minorities, have only a high school education, and buy packs rather than cartons.<sup>5</sup>

## Who Smokes Menthol?

- Over 50 percent of menthol cigarette smokers are female (52.2 percent) and close to 30 percent of all menthol smokers are African American (29.4 percent).<sup>6</sup>
- In 2008, 1 in 3 smokers aged 12 years and up reported smoking menthol cigarettes in the past month.<sup>7</sup>
- More women (37.5 percent) than men (30.8 percent) aged 12 years and older reported smoking menthols in the past month.<sup>7</sup>
- In combined 2004 to 2008 data, 82.6 percent of African American, 53.2 percent of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 32.3 percent of Hispanic/Latino, 31.2 percent of Asian, 24.8 percent of American Indian/Alaska Native and 23.8 percent of White smokers aged 12 years and older reported using menthol cigarettes in the past month.<sup>7</sup>
- In 2008, more adolescents (47.7 percent of 12-17 year olds) and young adults (40.8 percent of 18-25 year olds) reported smoking

menthols in the past month than adults (31.5 percent of 26 year olds and older).<sup>7</sup>

- In a national study conducted in 2009-10, 71 percent of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young adult smokers (18-25) reported smoking menthol cigarettes.<sup>8</sup>
- In combined 2004 and 2008 data, more smokers aged 12 years and older who started using cigarettes in the past year smoked menthols in the past month than longer-term smokers (44.6 percent vs. 31.8 percent).<sup>7</sup>

## Why Menthol?

- Menthol in cigarettes has an anesthetic effect on the throat, bronchi, and lungs, allowing smokers to inhale deeper and for harmful particles to settle deeper inside the lungs.<sup>9</sup> This inhalation pattern may cause greater harm to the smoker.
- Menthol also decreases the metabolism of nicotine and increases the amount of the addictive substance in the blood, making cigarettes even more dangerous and difficult to quit.<sup>10</sup>
- Many menthol-only smokers underestimate the dangers of menthol in cigarettes and actually hold stronger beliefs that menthols are less harmful than

regular cigarettes compared to non-menthol-only smokers.<sup>11</sup>

- Menthol-only smokers also have stronger beliefs in the medicinal effects of menthol cigarettes relative to non-menthol smokers.<sup>11</sup> Despite these beliefs, menthol cigarettes are not safer than regular cigarettes. Menthol cigarettes only mask the harshness of tobacco smoke making it easier for new smokers to start smoking and more challenging for current smokers to quit.

## Predatory Marketing

- Mentholated cigarettes, or menthols, were originally developed and promoted to women.<sup>12</sup> Since then, the tobacco industry has used a unique combination of advertising, packaging, pricing, and distribution channels to catch the interest of particular groups, such as youth and young adults, women, African Americans, and other specific priority or ethnic populations.
- The tobacco industry uses cutting-edge tactics that resonate with the current trends in hip-hop culture, which appeal to both urban and suburban youth.<sup>1</sup>
- In order to appeal to women, menthol ads often contain images of romantic couples, flowers, and springtime.<sup>13</sup>
- Cigarette packaging design and color are carefully chosen by the tobacco industry to create specific associations. An example of this is the green packages for mentholated cigarettes which suggest coolness and freshness.<sup>12</sup>
- The tobacco industry promotes cigarettes with lower menthol levels to attract new smokers and hook youth into a lifetime of addiction and higher levels of menthol to long-term smokers.<sup>3</sup>
- Tobacco retailers in low income, urban communities having high menthol sales are more likely to place larger exterior tobacco advertisements and have more menthol ads on their store fronts.<sup>1</sup>
- Tobacco retailers in low income, urban communities having high menthol sales receive higher discount rates on mentholated cigarette brands, including between \$1.00 and \$1.50 off per pack or *buy 1 get 1 free* promotions, while more affluent white neighborhoods see discounts on menthols of only about \$0.50 off per pack or *buy 2 get 1 free* offers.<sup>1</sup>
- Camel smokers and menthol smokers (Newport and Kool), who are more often young adults and African Americans, are much more likely to use promotional offers than those who smoke other brands.<sup>14</sup>
- Young adults and African Americans are also less likely to switch from menthol to non-menthol cigarettes regardless of higher product price.<sup>15</sup>
- Deaths from smoking-related diseases are higher among African-Americans than among whites, despite the fact that African-Americans typically smoke less and try to quit more often.<sup>18</sup>
- African Americans have twice the risk of stroke compared to other population groups.<sup>19</sup> Combined with the fact that smoking more than doubles a person's risk of stroke, the risk for stroke is even greater for African Americans.<sup>20</sup>
- Lung cancer rates are extremely high in the African American community, with African American men 36 percent more likely than White men to have the disease.<sup>21</sup>
- Heavy smoking doubles the rheumatoid arthritis risk among African Americans. The risk increases to more than fourfold for those heavy smokers who also have a genetic risk factor for the disease.<sup>22</sup>
- In California, the smoking rate among African American adults has consistently been greater than that of the general population. In 2008, the smoking prevalence rate among African American adults was 14.5 percent compared to 11.6 percent among the general adult population.<sup>23</sup>
- Since the 1970s, brand names like Kool, Newport, and Salem have been marketed to the African American community. These marketing campaigns have falsely suggested that smoking menthol flavored cigarettes carries less risk than regular cigarettes and that menthols are cool, hip, fresh, and fun.
- Historically, African Americans have been exposed to hundreds of tobacco ads and the tobacco industry has placed proportionately more menthol cigarette ads in African American magazines than in mainstream magazines.<sup>24</sup>

## Why Mentholated Tobacco Products Matter to the Health of the African American Community

- Tobacco use is the number one cause of preventable death and disease and the key contributor in the three major causes of death among African Americans: heart disease, cancer, and stroke.<sup>16</sup>
- According to a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, African Americans have a 26 percent higher smoking-related death rate for cancer and a 53 percent higher smoking-related death rate for circulatory diseases.<sup>17</sup>

- Today, menthol cigarettes are the overwhelming favorite tobacco product among African Americans. More than 80 percent of African Americans prefer to smoke menthol cigarettes compared to only about 20 percent of White smokers. The rate is even higher among young African American adults ages 26-34 years, 90 percent of whom smoke menthols.<sup>7</sup>
- Although African American youth in California have one of the lowest smoking rates, they are more likely to take up smoking later in life and die from tobacco-related diseases than their counterparts.<sup>25</sup>

## Menthol & Cessation

- Among African American smokers, menthol cigarette smoking is negatively associated with successful smoking cessation.<sup>26</sup>
- Quitting menthol cigarettes is particularly difficult, because menthol smokers have to get over the dependency on nicotine as well as positive associations with menthol itself such as the minty taste, cooling sensation, and sensory excitation.<sup>1</sup>
- Light menthol smokers (6-10 cigarettes per day) show greater signs of nicotine dependence (i.e., shorter time to first cigarette) than comparable non-menthol smokers.<sup>27</sup>
- Menthol smokers in general, and African American smokers in particular, have a difficult time quitting despite smoking significantly fewer cigarettes per day compared to non-menthol smokers.<sup>24, 28</sup>
- Menthol smokers experience similar health outcomes compared to those who smoke more non-menthol cigarettes per day.<sup>29</sup>
- Compared to non-menthol African American light smokers, menthol smokers are younger and have less confidence to quit smoking.<sup>30</sup>

## Food and Drug Administration Regulation & Menthol

- In 2009, Congress passed the Family Smoking Prevention & Tobacco Control Act granting the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with the regulatory authority over tobacco products.
- Based on the recommendations of the Family Smoking Prevention and Tobacco Control Act, on September 22, 2009, the FDA banned 13 specific flavorings in cigarettes: strawberry, grape, orange, clove, cinnamon, pineapple, vanilla, coconut, licorice, cocoa, chocolate, cherry, and coffee. Menthol was exempt from the ban.
- The FDA has the ability to prohibit menthol as an ingredient in cigarettes and other tobacco products. The Tobacco Products Scientific Advisory Committee (TPSAC) has been established and charged with developing a report assessing the impact of the use of menthol in cigarettes on public health and proposing recommendations to the FDA on whether menthol should be banned or not.
- The TPSAC report and recommendations were submitted to the FDA on March 18, 2011. The TPSAC report found that the availability of menthol cigarettes has an adverse impact on public health in the United States and recommended removal of menthol cigarettes from the marketplace.
- Many African American organizations opposing the ban on menthol in tobacco products

receive money from the tobacco industry (TI).<sup>31</sup> Their support of the TI's position seems based more on the financial support of African American institutions and organizations rather than the overarching health implications of this product on the African American community. These organizations acting on behalf of the TI use scare tactics and disseminate unfounded claims that banning menthol would lead to a surge in violence, law enforcement crises, and creation of illicit market for menthol cigarettes.

- The FDA has the authority to make the final decision whether it agrees with the TPSAC's recommendations or not. There is no set deadline for the FDA to act on the Committee's recommendations.

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